Blach Construction Cuts IT Costs and Improves Bottom Line in Competitive Business with NetApp AltaVault

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Industry
Construction

The Challenge
- Boost collaboration and efficiency to ensure the firm's profitability.
- Allow the IT team to focus more on activities that benefit the business.
- Keep backup and recovery costs down during high data growth.
- Improve data security.

The Solution
Deploy NetApp® AltaVault® cloud-integrated storage with Veeam Backup & Replication and Amazon S3.

Benefits
- Regains nearly 20 hours each month for IT to spend on activities that directly support the firm's profitability and competitiveness.
- Reduces backup storage and management costs.
- Improves confidence in data recoverability.
- Improves application performance and data security.

Thinking Differently About Construction

Serving Northern California since 1970, Blach Construction consistently exceeds the expectations of clients in a broad range of industries and construction types: education, corporate offices, medical facilities, historic preservation, high technology, and nonprofits.

The Challenge
Focus IT effort where it counts

Blach Construction differentiates itself from other construction companies in a variety of ways. One is its commitment to sustainability, as evidenced by its early involvement in the United States Green Building Council, its LEED® Gold-certified headquarters, and the fact that more than half of its project workforce is composed of LEED-accredited professionals.

Another way the firm stands out is in its use of technology to help ensure profitability in a very cost-competitive business. Dominic Silvia, Blach Construction's director of IT, leads the team that seeks to leverage technology to boost the bottom line.

"A critical IT effort, our number-one priority is improving IT infrastructure at job sites," says Silvia. This involves all aspects of the infrastructure, including connectivity, reliability, hardware, and data security, so those sites have access to the same advanced digital tools available to employees at headquarters. For example, at a job site, builders and clients view highly realistic walk-throughs of digital buildings rather than looking at stacks of blueprints.

Silvia is doing all of this with a very small IT team: three people to support the 200-person company, which has up to 30 or 40 job sites during busy times. In addition to working with the projects that directly support the firm's activities, Silvia must cope with the usual IT challenges, such as backing up ever-expanding volumes of data, planning for disaster recovery, and making decisions about where to host various services (cloud versus data center versus headquarters) in the firm's increasingly hybrid IT environment. He relies on solutions from NetApp to help make all of this possible.

The Solution
AltaVault and Amazon S3 streamline backups

Silvia's introduction to AltaVault came three years ago when he was thinking about how to design cost-effective

disaster recovery and backup strategies. The firm had already migrated from tape backup to a SAN-to-SAN approach using Dell EqualLogic systems at its headquarters and a remote office. But the volume of data that needed to be backed up was growing so rapidly—e-mail data grew by 50% in one year—that continuing to upgrade the SANs was becoming cost-prohibitive. Additionally, Silvia needed a cost-effective solution that could meet recovery point objectives (RPO) and accommodate its backup windows with limited connectivity to the remote location and no additional IT staff.

Data storage became Blach's first foray into the public cloud. "It really made sense to us to utilize the cloud as a backup repository," Silvia explains. "That way we wouldn't have to invest in more hardware to accommodate our storage growth. We could easily and cheaply keep more historical data and not have to manage storage hardware."

Silvia chose Amazon S3 as the company's cloud storage provider and a NetApp AltaVault cloud-integrated storage appliance. "In choosing the appliance, we also looked at another product that was somewhat less expensive, but it didn't do compression or deduplication," Silvia explains. "We could see that we'd get more value over the long term with AltaVault, since it would reduce the amount of data we'd have to store in the cloud. And overall it was a better-quality product."

Business Benefits
More support and collaboration tools at the job sites

The main benefit of replacing SAN-to-SAN backup with AltaVault and Amazon S3 is having nearly 20 hours returned to the business each month. "That was the amount of time someone on the IT team spent monitoring the backup jobs, tweaking the devices, making sure that we had storage to accommodate our recovery point objectives, and managing any connectivity issues with the SANs," recalls Silvia.

With AltaVault and Amazon S3, Silvia estimates that they now spend at most an hour or two on this work each month. The time saved is being used where the business needs it most—improving the IT infrastructure at job sites—so that people there can use the same advanced collaboration tools that they use in the home office.

"By not having to spend time trying to figure out why a backup isn't going through, or researching new storage devices, or buying and installing new storage devices, we can focus more on supporting the sites," Silvia explains. "The extra time allows us to focus our energy on things that will give our firm a competitive advantage such as supporting the virtual design group, helping operations employees improve productivity, and applying technology to help meet strategic business objectives."

Blach's use of AltaVault has reduced data storage costs to approximately $200 per month (for storing 5.5 terabytes, which represents Blach's total logical data volume of 64 terabytes). That's a huge savings compared to the $20,000 to $25,000 cost to upgrade a 4-terabyte SAN, which the firm had to do fairly frequently prior to using AltaVault.

AltaVault also gives Silvia greater confidence in Blach's ability to recover data, especially after a disaster. Recently, a data restore from the cloud took around an hour, something that would have taken many hours on the old tape system and would not have been nearly as reliable. "The problem with tapes is that you can never get them to work, no matter how much time you spend on them," Silvia noted about an earlier solution.

Silvia sees Blach Construction's use of NetApp solutions as both a competitive advantage and as one more way the company stands out. "We're innovative and on top of the curve in a lot of areas," Silvia says. "It's not just IT, but I appreciate that my company is willing to invest in new technologies to keep us moving ahead."

SOLUTION COMPONENTS

NetApp AltaVault (formerly SteelStore) cloud-integrated storage

Veeam Backup & Replication

Amazon S3

Another NetApp solution delivered by:

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